

Before we jump into this morning's lection, I want to offer a few broader statements about our Creator.

We familiarized ourselves with the Pentateuch this summer. We are reminded that ours is a God of collaborative and inclusive creation. We are reminded that ours is a God of liberation. We are reminded that ours is a God of lasting covenant. God is not Pharaoh. God is not rage. God is not distant. God is love. Forever. And we, as God's children, are made in the image of God, and undergirded in God's love. Forever.

In the coming weeks, we're going to do a deep dive into the four Gospels. Each account, in its own way, speaks to a profound revelation of God's love in the world: the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, we discover someone whose humanity is SO focused on God and SO consistent with its purpose, that his life illumines the divine in transcendent ways. Jesus is demonstrative of every conceivable power, and yet his demonstrations of power are the antithesis of any ruler we've ever known. Pharaoh, son of the sun, perhaps even the sun himself, demands the pomp and circumstance of praise. Jesus, son of Man, serves humanity, and elevates and empowers his neighbors.

Finally, when we engage ancient texts, we also engage ancient systems. Jesus taught in parables – he illustrated his points using the systems of power that were familiar to his audience. His comments about systems, especially abusive economic ones like the vassal system, and unjust socio-political ones like slavery, are subversive – Jesus juxtaposes the audacious injustice of systems with the audacious justice of God.

The takeaways: Loving creator. Jesus as manifestation of God's love. Lordship as servanthood. Ancient texts and systems. Subversive meanings.

Let's talk about Luke 17:1-10.

There are three basic things that happen in today's text: 1) The disciples learn more about the work ahead 2) Jesus reminds the disciples they are equipped for such work and 3) Jesus reminds the disciples that their work will not provide privileges and fringe benefits.

In the first few verses, Jesus instructs the disciples regarding what it takes to be a vested community member in the kinship of God. Leaders don't just talk about the idea of reconciliation; they participate in the cycle of reconciliation. They forgive. Again, and again, and again. They pursue and encourage forgiveness. It's not a ledger. It's a lifestyle.

Upon hearing the requirement to be bigger and better people, the disciples respond, "Increase our faith!" Jesus is quick to remind them that God's is not an economy of more and less, but rather an economy of enough. The disciples think they need more of something – in this case, faith as a currency – to live out the calling of deeply loving neighbor. Don't be fooled. Jesus isn't saying they don't have any Grey Poupon; Jesus isn't declaring a lack of faith upon the part of his disciples. Jesus is reminding them that they are enough. Even the smallest batch of what God have given us – that creative spark and umph – even a little, is all we need. Mustard seeds become mulberry trees.

In the last paragraph, Jesus reminds the disciples they needn't expect reward and recognition for simply doing what they are created and called to do. Would that Jesus, or the authors who crafted this story, have chosen a better metaphor than slave master and slave to illustrate the idea of expectations. Perhaps exercising caution would have spared significant pain and trauma doled out by the toxic interpretations of future listeners. This is NOT an endorsement of slavery. This is NOT a statement of righteous or unrighteous servitude. This is NOT a story asking you to decipher if you are slave or master.

Keith Nickle highlights the tension – He says this is an illustration of obedience, but it's nearly impossible for our modern ears to process this as a positive metaphor. The slavery metaphor taints the text. I don't disagree – I am not gonna fault anyone for tuning out as soon as they enter this danger zone.

To overcome the clumsiness and the outdatedness of this metaphor, we've got to bring the whole faith story into the pericope. The audience who Jesus preaches to would know about the institution of slavery. And they would also know the characteristics of the Exodus God.

The slave owner, the vassal lord, the governor, the noble, the emperor, any figure of domination would expect absolute obedience from their subject. There would be no reward for performance. And yet in nearly every instance, the master would also expect the receipt of thanksgiving, adulation, and higher standing for simply doing what they were required. How generous of the master to offer housing, food, and clothing to the people they denied freedom!

Nickle brings us back to the servanthood and humility of Jesus. Here is one who disciples us – who invites us into to community with God – and Jesus does this so well, there needn't be anything else. In other words, God does what God is supposed to do, and God's people do what God's people are supposed to do. The reward for leading in God's kin-dom is not a pyramid that memorializes your power, nor riches that excuse you from responsibility. There is no reward. There is simply enough. Community. Health. Belonging. Peace. Giftedness. Wholeness. Healing. Reconciliation. Love. Family. Life. Rebirth. Joy. Abundance. Jubilee. Purpose and Createdness. Balance. A Future. It's a divine economy!

In a world where every leader uses their power to ensure self-preservation, Jesus uses his to serve humanity. And there is the subversive, radical, hidden message of the parable. The very mention of an economy rooted in slavery by one who serves others alerts the audience to the audacious injustice of the ruling class and the audacious justice of God.

Let me close with a confession. I preached on this text three years ago. I don't remember writing a word of that sermon! Not one single word! I suppose a lot's happened in three years. Anyway, as I thought about how to incorporate the justice tension of dueling economies mentioned today, and World Communion Sunday, I looked back at the sermon. And the conclusion is still relevant. So I'll read it again.

As we come to the table this morning, one that's supposed to be global, and inclusive, and representative of all, I am struck by Jesus' warning. We come to such a table with responsibility, and accountability, and forgiveness, and faith, and no expectation of extras for doing what's required of us. We come to the table, called to love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves.

If we are serious about such a calling, we must begin to do the hard work of reconciliation; we must begin to love without expectation that our whiteness, that our maleness, that our riches, that our health, that our intellect, that our luck, that our fate, that our education, that our stability, that our normalization, that ANY of the markers of our privilege should afford us more in the community of God's enough-ness.

We must take accountability, becoming agents of generosity and humility. We must be leaders, not in our ability to forgive others, but in our willingness to ask forgiveness of those whom we so recklessly wound, intentionally or unintentionally. And we must believe in our faith – I promise you there's plenty of it – in order that we might be the reflection of the God who offers balm to wounded Samaritans; who runs with open arms to meet children who have veered off course; who finds Her lost coin and throws a party; who seeks Her missing sheep, even when 99 are in the fold; who offers bread and wine to all who breathe life; who loves, always, no matter the circumstance.

Good friends, God's table awaits. May we meet the One we follow there. And at this table, may we find strength to be the people God calls us to be.